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'How A Dream Was Built'[1]

I was born three years after Dr. King gave his 'I Have a Dream' speech in Washington, DC. So I was too young to have participated in the struggles of that decade. But in the 1970's and 80's I had the privilege of being part of the *reality* that dream helped to build—a *reality* in which 'content of character' came to matter, albeit not for everyone, more than 'color of skin.'

So today I thought I might share with you a few stories about how I came to learn about Dr. King, and how Dr. King's work built a dream with some people of my generation.

For the first ten years or so of my life, I lived in an all-white middle-class neighborhood in Milwaukee, WI, where I attended the local elementary school. On the first day of school when I was in 4th grade—it must have been 1975—a small yellow bus rolled up. Out

[1]Keynote address given at the Martin Luther King Jr. "Dream-Builders" Forum, 17 January 2011, Troost Elementary School, Kansas City, Missouri.

stepped 12-13 kids. As it turned out, two of those—Tyrone Gonzales and Lavelo McClain—were in my 4th grade class.

The three of us quickly became friends. Ty and me and 'V'—as everybody called Lavelo—used to hang on the playground, work together on math problems, and flirt with the girls. You know, the kind of stuff you all do all the time.

In a short period of time, V and I became tight. Many times during the week, instead of taking the bus back to his house, he would walk home with me after school and spend the afternoon and night. We would play in the neighborhood—all kinds of sports but also tag and other games. And we drank plenty of grape juice and ate plenty of pop tarts.

In time my parents and all the other kids and parents in that neighborhood got to know V; and V got to know all of them. V became for many of us something more than a 'visitor' or 'guest'; he became a part of our community. Of course, not everyone was accepting, or even kind. Kids can be cruel. Parents can be ignorant. We heard those words—I know you know the ones I am talking about—that cut your soul. But V was a strong and brave kid—a pioneer, really, though we never thought of it that way.

This went on for a while. We had a good friendship. Then one day V invited me to spend Friday night at his house. I asked my parents during dinner, 'Hey, can I spend the night on Friday at V's house?'

They hesitated—long and hard. You know, in that way parents do when you can tell that they are eventually going to say 'no.' And then they said they would think about it.

I said, 'Why? What do you need to think about? Why is it ok for V to spend the night at our house but it's not ok for me to spend the night at V's house?'

I saw by the looks on their faces that the question wasn't easy to answer—and that they had not expected it.

'Ok. You can go,' came the response.

And that was that. On that Friday, and many Fridays for a couple of years, I took the bus to V's house. Just like we did in my neighborhood, in V's world we played with the neighborhood kids, drank grape juice and ate pop tarts. I got to know those streets and street corner stores. And I got cool with the kids who used to hang there.

There were many similarities between my experience in V's world and V's experience in my world. Kids could be cruel, and parents ignorant; and not everybody accepted me. But many did.

In my neighborhood and in V's, we heard our share of insults and slurs. Sometimes we'd talk a little bit about all that cruelty and ignorance. But not very often. We were kids, after all, and we just wanted to play and have fun.

But looking back now, I see that there were big differences as well. Not in the kids or adults and the content of their character. No, the differences were in the history and opportunities and challenges people in V's neighborhood faced.

I remember there was a Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Community Center nearby. We used to go there on Saturdays. And it was there that I discovered my passion—and skill—for boxing. Coaches there taught us how to use our hands, how to slip punches, and how to carry ourselves with dignity inside and outside the ring.

It was thanks to them—and V and that yellow bus that brought V to my neighborhood school—that I learned about respect and self-control and the importance of character in tough situations. I

used to wonder why there wasn't an MLK Center in my neighborhood…I still do.

Along with introducing me to new friends and a different world, weekends at V's also gave me a street-level view of a life made hard; a place where Dr. King's dream and Malcom X's nightmare were jumbled together. V's mother was incarcerated, and had been for a while. She had shot his father, and paralyzed him from the waist down. V lived with his grandmother—I loved her cooking and stories—and his disabled Uncle Ike. His father lived up the block with a girlfriend.

Already in the mid-1970's in Milwaukee, major manufacturing jobs had begun to disappear in the urban core. The demand for skilled and semi-skilled labor was declining, and that, as we see today in KC as well, hit the African-American community hard.

What was once an institutional ghetto—a place that, however confining, still contained a functioning, stable middle class and a variety of businesses and services—was becoming a jobless ghetto—an ethnoracial trap of chronic unemployment, poverty, and crime.

As a result, V, and all the folks who lived in V's neighborhood, were victims of increased acts of individual violence. They also

suffered from structural violence. They were forced to live in environments that put them at risk and left them few options for employment and few opportunities to make good choices in their lives.

In 6th grade my parents divorced. My mother remarried, and my sister and I moved with our mother to a different house in another part of the city. I had a new step-father, as well as a step-brother and step-sister. A lot was going on and changing in my life. And V and I lost touch.

In 7th grade, however, I was enrolled in Rufus King Middle School—a newly formed magnet school in the Milwaukee Public School system. In many ways that school was not unlike a charter school such as Alta Vista in KC. It had a Middle School and a High School. I attended both.

At that time the Milwaukee Public School district was actively desegregating educational institutions in the city. But this time *my sister and I were the kids on that yellow bus*; we were the minority group. And so, once again, I found myself in an education setting where, in no small way, the attempt to build a dream was underway.

Activists can march in favor of desegregation; law-makers can legislate it; and courts and police can try to enforce it. But it takes time and everyday people—students, parents, educators, citizens—to break down the walls and barriers in individual minds and hearts.

Today I understand how unique those years were. A bunch of young adults from across my city went to middle and high school together and developed strong ties to one another. We ate dinner together, went to parties together, and hung out in one another's homes and neighborhoods; and we dated across ethnoracial lines. We weren't perfect kids. We made our share of mistakes. But we learned from one another. And our shared experiences cultivated our character.

In my sophomore year, the city cut the funding for the busing program. We were issued city bus passes, which suited us just fine. Now we could go all over the city any time we wanted. And so we did. The city became our schoolyard; its many cultures our curriculum.

Now, I realize that the history of school desegregation in KC is very different than what I experienced in Milwaukee back in my day. But I would be willing to bet that we were not all that different from

you. And our parents were not all that different from yours. They wanted the best for us. And we wanted to make them proud.

In any case, it is thanks largely to my experiences with my school friends that I am the person that I am today. It is also what brought me here to you this morning. You see, when I saw the face and heard the tragic story of Mr. Hopkins' son on the evening news, I saw the face of one of those kids I went to school with.[2] A good kid—smart, dignified, a young man full of life and potential. I thought about all those kids I graduated with in 1984—as well as some we lost along the way.

Let me tell you about some of those kids. Two years or so ago, the Rufus King High School class of '84 had its 25th reunion. Now *you know* I didn't miss that event.

It was a great party. But one with a purpose. It was a chance to reconnect, but also to take stock, to see where we all stood, and to see how our lives were shaped and realized by our experiences as kids growing up in Milwaukee in the wake of Dr. King's dream.

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[2] Nelson E. Hopkins Jr. was shot and killed on his way home from a local library. More information and news coverage of the case can be found here: http://www.kmbc.com/news/21779957/detail.html.

The class of ’84 was notable in many respects. Our basketball team was undefeated, 24-0, and Wisconsin State Champs. The staring five, Hoyt, Doug, Van, Coop and Mike—five of my good friends—all received college scholarships to play ball. And four of them graduated from college.

Guess what? *None* of them played in the NBA. Instead, they went on to pursue successful careers. Hoyt works for the FBI. Doug is a college basketball coach. So is Mike. And Coop is a lawyer.

We had other talented students as well. Several of our stars in the theater and art departments went on to college, including one to Julliard. She ended up working off Broadway in New York.

One of my other best friends, Peter Balestrieri, went on to get his degree in education and now is an assistant principal at Virgil Middle School, a public school in Los Angeles.

Many others became military officers, lawyers, doctors, restaurant managers, ministers, small business owners, psychologists, counselors, postal workers, real estate agents and teachers—and yes, one even became a philosophy professor and Dean of an Honors College!

And then there was my favorite, Lena C. Taylor.

Now let me tell you a little bit about Ms. Taylor.

In the senior class poll, Lena was the winner for "biggest mouth." Lena spoke her mind. She was strong, unbreakable. She stood up and spoke out for what she thought was right, even when it was inconvenient. She called people out—other students, teachers, and yes, even a few administrators. She drove us all crazy. But we loved her anyway.

Lena graduated with us and went on to earn a Bachelor's degree in English Literature at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. She then earned a law degree at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

Do you know what she did after that? In November 2004, Lena Taylor—the girl with the 'biggest mouth'—was elected to the 4th District of the Wisconsin State Senate. In accomplishing that, she became only the second African-American woman to serve in the Wisconsin senate.

At the reunion she gave us all a copy of a photo of her with President Obama. We celebrated her, and one another, long into the night. Her accomplishment was hers, of course. But it was also

ours—and, indirectly, Dr. King's. And so were the accomplishments of the rest of that class of 200 or so students.

I know that my story is not yours, and that the challenges of today are not those of yesterday. We all have our own history to make. But as a teacher and one who has lived—and helped to make—a bit of history, I want you to know that the past, present and future are not separate things.

You have all probably heard the saying that, "The past determines the future." That is certainly true to some extent.

But it is also true that the present and future will determine the past. What we do today—and tomorrow—really can extend Dr. King's dream forward in the 21st century. Of course that won't be easy. At times, some might even despair and say it's impossible.

But listen hard when you hear that word, 'impossible.' As Muhammad Ali once said: 'Impossible is not a fact. It's an opinion. Impossible is not a declaration. It's a dare. Impossible is nothing.'

Thank you very much for your time.